AN ANALYSIS OF CORPORATE IMAGE REPAIR STRATEGIES IN 2018

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Departmental Honors in the Department of Strategic Communication Texas Christian University Fort Worth, Texas

May 6, 2019
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Abstract
Introduction

Every year we see many examples of beloved figures or brands being exposed for serious ethical lapses. We live in a time where public figures and corporations are constantly under a microscope and can be scrutinized by the masses for every mistake. Since the rise of social media and the digital age, we have seen careers made and broken by headlines accessible to the public at the swipe of a finger.

This project looks at how companies and individuals rebuild their brand’s reputation after being exposed for doing the wrong thing. This is an in-depth look at “saving face” in the public eye. How do companies do it? How should companies be doing it?

My project looked at three high profile corporate crises that occurred in 2018. Two of these cases were relatively straightforward examples of modern-day corporate mishaps. These cases were covered extensively in the news media as well as on social media. Many people—such as the general public as well as members of the media—had opinions about the individual situations and how they should be handled. What makes these cases straightforward is that the communication was coming from exclusively from the organization with the sole purpose to repair the damaged image. The third case I looked into, the Dallas Mavericks sexual harassment allegations, was much more complex. This case involved a multitude of different actors and representatives working to repair and maintain different images for different reasons. Some of the communication in this case was extremely personal while some was for the greater purpose of the team as a whole.

This project looks at what scholars said should be done in these crisis situations, what was actually done, and how the complexity of human beings makes some crises unable to easily fit into the existing academic mold.
Literature Review

“Throughout life we are repeatedly faced with situations that impel us to explain or justify our behavior and offer excuses or apologies for those aspects of our behavior that offend and provoke reproach from those around us”

-William L. Benoit

Introduction

Crisis communication is an umbrella term defined by Timothy Coombs as, “the collection, processing, and dissemination of information required to address a crisis situation” (Coombs, 2015, p.2). It is also important to note his definition of a crisis as, “the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization’s performance and generate negative outcomes” (Coombs, 2015, p.3). Therefore, crisis communication can include messages about an entire host of issues such as acts of nature including earthquakes and fires or intentional disasters such as terrorism or product tampering. This umbrella term also includes corporate mishaps, accidents, and failures—most of which happen in the public eye. Different types of communication are necessary to address each of these types of crises.

Other types of crisis communication include messages about crises beyond the scope of human error, such as natural disasters and terrorism (Benoit). For example, in a natural disaster, an organization might need some image repair discourse (if, for instance, its response to the disaster was criticized), but it would also need to use crisis communication practices to coordinate an effective response to the physical damage caused by the disaster. Doug Newsom, Judy VanSlyke Turk, and Dean Kruckeberg break down this idea further by dividing crises into their respective sources. The source of a crisis could be an act of nature, an intentional
action, or an unintentional action. The crises could also be violent or cataclysmic, resulting in immediate loss of life or property or they could be nonviolent such as problems with business failures, stock market crashes, or offensive language (Benoit, 2015).

This paper is a study of the area of crisis communication that focuses on corporate image repair.

**Image Repair Theory (IRT)**

Image repair is an important subset of crisis communication. More concentrated than crisis communication in its entirety, image repair focuses solely on improving image and saving face from criticism and suspicion or preventing anticipated criticism. (Benoit, 2015).

Benoit (2015) tells us that image threats, resulting in attempts to repair and save face are inevitable for four reasons. First, the world we live in has limited resources. This means we compete with one another for tangible and intangible goods such as money, homes, corner offices, lovers, attention, etc. Historically, civilizations have always disagreed on the allocation and distribution of these resources. Next, circumstances out of our control sometimes prevent us from meeting our obligations. This is because the people, events, and environment around us significantly influence human behavior and these factors can cause situations and events to become problematic. The third reason is that human beings are not perfect, and when we make mistakes or accidents happen, some are due purely to human error and others are a result of our selfish tendencies. Self-interest may cloud our judgment at times. Lastly, human beings are individuals with different sets of end goals, which create conflict among those hoping and working for different situational outcomes. The most challenging part of these situations can be balancing the easiest and most efficient thing to do with the right thing to do (Benoit, 2015).
**Restoration v. repair.** Benoit (2015) has researched the effects of crisis and its implications in numerous studies and previously has referred to persuasive discourse as image restoration. He changed the name of the theory from image restoration to image repair to avoid implications that defense strategies and persuasive techniques might be able to completely restore the image (Benoit, 2015). It is rare that all bad feelings and negative energy would disappear as a result of an image repair campaign. It is possible that repair might be completely successful but even then, it is still just repair.

**Why image matters.** When we believe that our character has been questioned, our reputation tarnished, or our face threatened, we rarely ignore the problem. Benoit (2015) coins the term “defensive utterances” as persuasive attempts to reshape the audience’s attitudes, creating or changing beliefs about the accused’s responsibility for an act and creating or changing values about the offensiveness of those acts (Benoit, 2015, p. 3). Defensive utterances are in turn, responses to persuasive attacks or messages that attempt to create unfavorable attitudes about a target (2). Attacks on credibility and reputation can be extremely damaging because a damaged image can hurt persuasiveness. Companies can lose business, politicians can lose support, and celebrities can lose fans.

**Why is an image attacked?** A threat to one’s image exists fundamentally because of two factors (Pomerantz, 1978). First, an action occurred that is widely accepted as offensive, undesirable, or unacceptable. Second, an identifiable party or individual is responsible for the action. If both of these factors are believed to be true by the relevant audience, a company or organization can assume that its reputation is at risk. If it wishes to repair its image after damage, it must act accordingly. Perception is of high importance here. If the audience perceives the act to be offensive and damaging, the persuader (company or organization) must act if it wishes to
save face (Benoit, 2015). Generally, for action to occur the persuader must believe that the audience is offended or upset by a given situation. The persuader’s perceptions of the action motivate their engagements to start image repair strategies.

**Attack and defense.** Benoit (2015) says, “Offensiveness can be thought of as existing on a continuum: Actions vary in the degree of offensiveness attributed to them” (p. 29). We all know that different situations call for different reactions. The level of offensiveness, the perceived amount of harm, the length of time the issue is discussed in media, and the more widespread the negative affects all play into how the persuader takes action. This is where perceptions are important once again. In order for a defense to be deemed necessary against an attack, the perceived audience must believe that the company or organization is at fault. In order for the accused to take action, there must be the perception that harm has been done and image repair is necessary.

**Understanding beliefs and values.** When we study crisis communication we are studying the nature of people’s attitudes. Building on the work of Fishbein and Ajzen, Benoit (2015) notes that attitudes are comprised of two factors: beliefs (facts, descriptions of people, objects and events) and values (favorable and unfavorable evaluations). One cannot exist without the other, and both are equally important in regards to repairing a tarnished image or diffusing a potentially unfavorable persuasive attack. “Some of these beliefs overlap between different people, but a given audience member can have some unique cognitions” (Benoit, 2015, p. 31).

**Assumptions of the theory.** In this section I will describe the assumptions that are necessary to address before breaking down Benoit’s (2015) image repair theory. If we believe the theory to be true, we also accept the following assumptions, and it is important to be aware of them before diving into the strategies themselves. Benoit claims there are two main assumptions
that form the basis for his image repair theory. The first is the idea that communication is a goal-directed activity. This assumption actually dates back to Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* in the sense that the three genres of rhetoric (political, judicial, epideictic) are tied to the speaker’s goal (Benoit, 2015). People generally have reasons for saying what they say. Communication put out into the world is generally intentional, purposeful, and goal-directed. However, this assumption requires four qualifications to be fully understood in relation to this project:

1. Communicators may have multiple goals that are not completely compatible.
2. At times a person’s (or corporation’s) goals may be vague, ill-informed, or unclear.
3. People do not devote the same attention to each and every communicative encounter.
4. Even when the speaker’s goals are clear or relatively clear, it may be difficult for others to identify them.

For the purpose of this project, I treat “communication” as an instrumental activity intentionally used to attain the speaker’s desired goals. “Image repair messages are clearly purposeful, intended to deal with threats to the communicator’s image” (Benoit, 2015, p. 16).

The second assumption is the idea that maintaining a favorable reputation is a key goal of communication. Benoit notes an idea by Fisher (2011) that there are four goals in communication about identity: affirmation (giving birth to an image), reaffirmation (revitalizing an image), purification (correcting an image), and subversion (undermining an image). Therefore, image repair represents the motive of purification by administering messages attempting to repair an already damaged image. To further this claim, Fisher (2011) draws on multiple authors and studies all proving that human beings care about saving face and when their face (or reputation, image, self-image) is threatened, they feel compelled to act. This is the rhetorical idea of ethos when we look at speech from an Aristotelian perspective. As Aristotle
argued, “We believe good men more fully and more readily than others; this is true generally whatever the question is, and absolutely where exact certainty is impossible and opinions divided” (Aristotle, 1356, a6-b).

We have established that face is important, and individuals, corporations, and groups are motivated to do what is necessary to preserve their reputations. Therefore, speech is used as a primary means of achieving the goal of “saving face” when that face is threatened.

**How the theory works.** The need for image repair is simple. A person, company, or group is accused of some sort of wrongdoing and their reputation is threatened. Depending on the perceived threat to one’s reputation, the accused will then produce a message to repair or purify their image to the best of their ability (Benoit, 2015).

The theory of image repair strategies is simplified in Table 1. Since my project is application based (as opposed to a study of theories) it is beyond the scope of my research to evaluate these theories in great detail aside from what is included in the sections above. Further reading: see Benoit (2015).

**Strategies.** Benoit (2015) has developed a comprehensive list of strategies based on existing theories in communication studies. The five strategies are: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. The inclusion of these strategies is relevant to my project, as I call upon them to determine their effectiveness in the cases I choose to study. The following definitions are paraphrased from Benoit’s text as a reference for this project.

**Denial.** The accused denies that the offensive act actually occurred or denies that he or she did it. This strategy also includes victimage, or shifting the blame. This provides a source for
ill will to transfer away from the accused and answers the question, “Who did it?” Variations include offering an alibi in a criminal trial.

**Evasion of Responsibility.** This particular strategy consists of four variants. Provocation is the claim that the offensive act was actually just a response to another wrongful act and that the blame should be shifted to the provocateur instead of the accused. Defeasibility is pleading lack of information or control over the situation. Excuses based on accidents are attempts to provide information that may reduce the apparent responsibility for the offensive act. Finally, justification on the basis of intention is when the wrongful act is not outright denied; yet the audience is asked to forgive because the act was done with good intentions.

**Reducing offensiveness.** This approach is broken down into six variants that seek to reduce the amount of ill will felt towards the accused in the offensive situation. Bolstering is used to reduce the negative effects of the action and improve the accused’s public perception. Bolstering means to strengthen the audience’s positive impression of the accused by relating positive attributes or actions from the past. Minimization means to make the offensive act not seem as offensive as it first appeared. If a company or organization can convince its audience that the situation is not as bad as it originally seemed due to media coverage, word of mouth, etc., its reputation can be repaired to the extent that this tactic is effective. Differentiation means to lessen the offensiveness of an action by distinguishing the action from an even more offensive action. Transcendence is the intentional placement of the act in a different context to make it seem less offensive. Attacking one’s accuser is essentially exactly what it sounds like; it works to reduce offensiveness by lessening the accuser’s credibility. Lastly, compensation is when the accused attempts to pay the victim to offset negative feelings about the incident. None of these
Strategies deny that the accused committed the act; they just aim to diminish negative feelings about the act.

**Corrective Action.** The accused takes steps to fix the problem. Approaches can include restoring the situation to how things were before the act, taking steps to make sure the act never occurs again, and enhanced prevention techniques, such as new corporate policies and procedures, that are communicated to the public. This strategy differs from compensation because it actually addresses the source of wrongdoing.

**Mortification.** Mortification means to accept responsibility and ask for forgiveness. However, there is no universally accepted formula for an effective apology. Potential apologies can include explicit acceptance of blame, expression of remorse, or request for forgiveness. This strategy can be ambiguous because “I’m sorry” can mean a direct acceptance of fault or simply an expression of sympathy.

**Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)**

“*Silence is too passive and allows others to control the crisis.*”

—Timothy Coombs

As I move on to talk about Coombs’ (2015) work, it is important to note why I chose to use his research in conjunction with Benoit’s. Benoit’s research exists as taxonomy of strategies that already exist out in the communication field. How do communicators know which of Benoit’s many strategies to use? SCCT attempts to answer this question. For Coombs (2015), the right response depends on the type of crisis, the level of attributed responsibility, and the prior reputation of the organization.
Understanding SCCT. How should an organization communicate during a crisis?

Coombs (2015) identifies three types of crises in the order of responsibility attribution, meaning how much the public blames the organization for what happened, from least to greatest:

1. Victim: The organization is the victim of a crisis (natural disasters, negative rumors)

2. Accident: The organization’s actions leading to the crisis were unintentional (challenges, technical-error, product harm)

3. Preventable: The organization knowingly engage in offensive behavior or precautions could have been in place to avoid reputational threat (human-error accidents, human-error product harm, organizational misdeeds)

The scope of this project focuses exclusively on the third cluster—the greatest level of reputational threat. Coombs (2015) refers to crises as negative events that cause stakeholders to make their own interpretations or attributions about who is responsible for the act. These attributions affect how stakeholders view and engage with the organization in the future. SCCT uses attribution theory to develop a set of recommendations for action (using variations of Benoit’s image repair strategies) following a crisis. “Attribution theory is based on the belief that people assign responsibility for negative, unexpected events” (Coombs, 2015, p.144) The type of crisis affects the amount of blame attributed to the organization. The amount of blame attributed to the organization alters the course of responsive action. If the organization’s audience attributes a high level of blame, the situation will warrant a highly accommodative response.

Reputational threat is also affected by prior history and reputation of the organization. Poor prior reputation can intensify reputational threat and alter the recommended course of action.
**How to use SCCT.** Following the identification of the levels of responsibility and reputational threat to the organization, SCCT uses a variation of Benoit’s image restoration model to determine a recommended course of action (see Table 2). The response strategies are organized into four “postures”:

1. Denial (attacking the accuser, denial, scapegoating)
   a. Seek to remove connection between the crisis and organization.

2. Diminishment (excusing, justification)
   a. Attempt to reduce attributions of organizational control over the crisis or the negative effects of the crisis.

3. Rebuilding (compensation, apology, taking responsibility)
   a. Try to improve the organization’s reputation.

4. Bolstering (reminding of past good works, ingratiation, victimage)
   a. Supplemental to the other three postures. Seek to build a positive connection between organization and stakeholders.

On the topic of choosing which strategy works best for a given situation, Coombs says, “SCCT organizes these strategies by determining whether the intent of the strategy is to change perceptions of the crisis of the organization” (Coombs, 2015, pp.147). Please reference Table 3 for Coombs’ recommended use of the crisis response strategies.

Coombs says that there is a place in crisis communication for denial but notes that it is a dangerous game. Appropriate situations to use denial would be false rumors, when an organization is involved with a crisis but has no actual connection, or when a crisis applies to an entire industry but not the organization in question. Coombs calls denial the, “most dangerous crisis response strategy” (2015, p. 146). If a company denies a crisis and then is found to have
involvement, the repercussions will be much worse and will alter the course of action for repair. Most often, the motivation behind the denial strategy is protection from legal action. The unfortunate consequence of denial is a double crisis, when the crisis response creates a more damaging situation than the initial crisis. Coombs suggest communicators avoid denial if there is any chance the organization had some responsibility for the crisis.

**Research Questions**

Studying these theories led me to the research questions for this project.

RQ1: In today’s fast-paced and interconnected world, how do major United States corporations deal with crisis in the public eye?

RQ2: How do these actions align with the existing research on the subject?

RQ3: Does following the recommendations of communications scholars always make for a successful image repair campaign?

**Method**

My research began with my literature review. I studied the two most relevant experts in the crisis communication field, Timothy Coombs and William L. Benoit. I compiled the information necessary to conduct my research and familiarized myself with the existing theories on image repair. The research by these two experts helped me form a system for identifying the strategies used in the different crises and how they functioned in each.

I closely followed the news and social media as well as reports on PR News and PR Daily to ensure I did not miss a crisis as it unfolded. I considered six different crises for this project but ended up choosing the three most relevant and interesting.

Upon choosing the crises for my project I did an in-depth case study of each one. The corporations I chose to analyze are H&M, United Airlines, and the Dallas Mavericks. I outlined
the timeline of events as well as the existing news coverage on each situation. Part of my data collection process was monitoring the news source closest to the headquarters of the corporation. I did this in order to create a coding system to compare the cases to each other. I monitored the amount of time each story was covered in the news and the frequency in which each situation was reported. For H&M this news source was *The New York Daily News*. For United Airlines the news source was *The Chicago Sun*. For the Dallas Mavericks, I used *The Dallas Morning News*.

My research on each case was conducted systematically, mimicking and modifying the techniques used by Maria E. Len-Rios (2010) in her study of the image repair of Duke University following the lacrosse team scandal. I analyzed the individual cases by looking into the channel and spokesperson being used, the form of communication, and the case’s connections to IRT and SCCT.

Each of my case studies included an in-depth report on the details of the event, an organized timeline, and then an analysis of the strategies used and their effectiveness. For the case study on the Dallas Mavericks I also included individual analyses of each actor and his/her communication relevant to the situation. I did this by breaking down and categorizing the strategies used in the statements and then comparing to the SCCT recommended course of action. The analysis section of each case study is an in-depth look at each strategy used (as outlined by Benoit) and then the effects of each. I conclude each case study with some wrap-up thoughts about the effectiveness of the campaign and how closely the actors involved followed the recommended course of action by scholars.

Based on my analysis, I created my own opinions and insights about the best practices in crisis communication in 2018. My definition of a successful image repair campaign was based
on the amount of time the story remained in the news and the attitude towards the company represented in news reports.

Results

In order to address this study’s research questions, three cases were examined. Each one is described below.

H&M Case Study

Facts. On January 7, 2018, blogger Stephanie Yeboah tweeted an image of a small black boy modeling an H&M sweatshirt printed with the words "Coolest Monkey in the Jungle" (see Timeline 1) The tweet generated 18,000 retweets and 23,000 likes in less than 24 hours with the majority of the responses expressing negativity towards the brand. That same evening, New York Times columnist Charles Blow tweeted at H&M saying, "Have you lost your damn minds?" (Brennan, 2018, para. 12) Following the backlash, the brand replaced the image of the black boy with an image of the sweatshirt by itself and the product remained for sale on the website. Musician The Weeknd tweeted at the brand saying, "Woke up this morning shocked and embarrassed by this photo. I'm deeply offended and will not be working with @hm anymore..." (Brennan, 2018, para. 6).

Response. H&M responded hastily, issuing an apology by the next morning, January 9. The brand issued a tweet and a press release on its website simultaneously at 2:47 a.m. The tweet read,

We understand that many people are upset about the image of the children's hoodie. We, who work at H&M, can only agree. We're deeply sorry that the picture was taken, and we also regret the actual print. Therefore, we've not only removed the image from our channels, but also the garment from our product offering. It's obvious that our routines
haven't been followed properly. This is without any doubt. We'll thoroughly investigate why this happened to prevent this type of mistake from happening again. (H&M, 2018)

The news release features a short quote under the following headline:

To all customers, staff, media, stakeholders, partners, suppliers, friends and critics. We would like to put on record our position in relation to the image and promotion of a children’s sweater, and the ensuing response and criticism. Our position is simple and unequivocal – we have got this wrong and we are deeply sorry. (H&M, 2018)

The full statement from H&M read:

H&M is fully committed to playing its part in addressing society’s issues and problems, whether it’s diversity, working conditions or environmental protection – and many others. Our standards are high and we feel that we have made real progress over the years in playing our part in promoting diversity and inclusion. But we clearly haven’t come far enough. We agree with all the criticism that this has generated – we have got this wrong and we agree that, even if unintentional, passive or casual racism needs to be eradicated wherever it exists. We appreciate the support of those who have seen that our product and promotion were not intended to cause offense but, as a global brand, we have a responsibility to be aware of and attuned to all racial and cultural sensitivities – and we have not lived up to this responsibility this time. This incident is accidental in nature, but this doesn’t mean we don’t take it extremely seriously or understand the upset and discomfort it has caused. We have taken down the image and we have removed the garment in question from sale. It will be recycled. We will now be doing everything we possibly can to prevent this from happening again in future. Racism and bias in any shape or form, conscious or unconscious, deliberate or accidental, are simply unacceptable and
need to be eradicated from society. In this instance, we have not been sensitive enough to this agenda. Please accept our humble apologies. (H&M, 2018)

On January 9 and 10, stories were released in the New York Daily News informing the public that other stars such as LeBron James, Diddy, and G-Eazy had joined the conversation and canceled their ties with the brand. The paper reported on January 11 that the mother of the boy in the photo had reportedly released a statement on social media calling for critics to stop "crying wolf" and "causing unnecessary issues" (Brennan, 2018, para. 1). The statement of the mother brought the issue to trending status again as people began to discuss her point of view on social media. On January 16 The New York Daily News reported that the family of the black child featured in the advertisement had moved from their home in Sweden over "security concerns". The report features a quote from the mother of the boy that says, "I respect other people's opinions on the issue. I know racism exists, but does the shirt to me speak racism? No, it doesn’t" (Elizalde, 2018, para. 5).

On January 13, reports emerged of a South African opposition party storming H&M stores across the country in protest (The Associated Press, 2018). The group calls itself the Economic Freedom Fighters and reportedly pressured local shopping malls to evict H&M stores from their premises. Security footage showed products and displays thrown across the store. A leader of the group, Julius Malema said, "We make no apology about what the fighters did today. We are not going to allow anyone to use the color of our skin to humiliate us and to exclude us" (Elizalde, 2018, para. 4). A statement released on H&M's South African website read, "Our position is simple—we have got this wrong and we are deeply sorry. We strongly believe that racism and bias in any shape or form, deliberate or accidental, are unacceptable and not in line
with our values" (H&M, 2018). On the same day, January 13, H&M ended up releasing a second official statement on Twitter that read:

> We are aware of the recent events in several of our South African stores. Out of concern for the safety of our employees and customers, we have temporarily closed all stores in the area. We strongly believe that racism and bias in any shape or form, deliberate or accidental, are simply unacceptable. We stress that our store staff had nothing to do with our poor judgment of producing the children's hoodie and the image. (H&M, 2018)

On Jan 16. H&M posted the appointment of a diversity leader on its Facebook page. The brand announced Annie Wu, Global Manager for Employee Relations would be the new global leader for diversity and inclusiveness. In the post, the brand said:

> The recent issue was entirely unintentional, but it demonstrates so clearly how big our responsibility is as a global brand. We have reached out, around the world, inside and outside H&M to get feedback. Our commitment to addressing diversity and inclusiveness is genuine, therefore we have appointed a global leader, in this area, to drive our work forward. (H&M, 2018)

**Analysis.** The news coverage on this issue from the *New York Daily News* lasted ten days and consisted of ten stories published specifically about the incident. The first story emerged January 8 and the final story was published on January 17. The brand issued three official Tweets about the incident, one Facebook post, and two media statements on its website over the course of the incident. From my research, all of the statements collected have been from the brand itself—no spokesperson was used. No lawsuits have been filed and the brand has not publicly announced the termination of any employees. The brand primarily used social media and its website to communicate with shareholders and consumers. There were no public
statements made about the termination of contracts with celebrities. The brand appointed one new personnel member, a diversity leader, as a result of the issue.

H&M used two major image repair strategies as outlined by Benoit (2015): corrective action and mortification. Benoit defined corrective action as how the persuader (H&M) tries to create new beliefs about the accused's (also H&M) plans to remedy the problem. Corrective action, in this case, includes the removal of the image and the product from the website, a promise to investigate the initial production of this garment, and the appointment of a diversity leader within the company. Benoit defined mortification as an apparently sincere apology, expression of regret, and request for forgiveness. In H&M's first official statement, the brand uses the word "sorry" once and expresses "regret for the actual print" (H&M, 2018, para. 4). The statement on its website says, "Our position is simple and unequivocal – we have got this wrong and we are deeply sorry" (H&M, 2018, para. 1) The company’s full media statement online states that they "agree with criticism" and urges readers to "Please accept our humble apologies" (H&M, 2018, para. 9).

Benoit (2015) writes, "Fundamentally, an attack on one's image, face, or reputation is comprised of two components: 1) An act occurred that is undesirable. 2) You (brand) are responsible for that act" (p. 43). He says that only if both of those conditions are believed to be true by the audience is the accused's reputation at risk. In the case of H&M, the brand consistently admitted fault from the start of the online conversations, H&M recognized the offensiveness of its actions and asked for forgiveness from its consumers. Here, we can see how the accused's refusal to argue with the audience can lead to a speedy recovery of face. By agreeing that a fault has been committed and immediately working to implement corrective action, the brand can repair its image with the public by appearing truthful and remorseful.
Although the brand does acknowledge that this event was "accidental in nature," it addresses the seriousness of the offense and the discomfort it may have caused its consumers.

One point that is prevalent in this case but is not addressed by Benoit is the response time between the offense and the issue of a statement by the brand. In the case of the first initial outcry on social media, H&M responded within 12 hours. The same can be said for the issue regarding the store storming in South Africa—statements were posted on social media and on the website the same day. This point is important because it shows to the public that the company took the matter seriously and that its response was genuine.

**United Airlines Case Study**

**Facts.** On March 12, 2018, Catalina Robledo and her two daughters boarded a United Airlines flight from Houston to New York (Sun-Times Staff, 2018). The trio brought along their 10-month-old French bulldog inside its TSA-approved carrier. The dog was placed under the seat in front of the woman when a flight attendant approached and insisted the dog be moved into the overhead compartment. A passenger named Maggie Gremminger reported that the woman “adamantly pushed back” and repeatedly explained that there was a live dog in the bag (Rubin, 2018, para. 3). The woman stated that she had purchased the specific travel pass from United for her dog and did not want to put the animal in an enclosed bin. Eventually, the altercation between the flight attendant and the woman ended in the dog being placed in the overhead bin. It was reported that the dog cried throughout the flight and eventually became silent. At the end of the 3-hour flight, the dog was dead. Gremminger said, “The woman was crying in the airplane aisle on the floor” (Rubin, 2018, para. 5).
United’s pet policy states, “A pet traveling in cabin must be carried in an approved hard-sided or soft-sided kennel. The kennel must fit completely under the seat in front of the customer and remain there at all times” (United Airlines, 2018, para.1).

The situation went viral when Gremminger tweeted a photo of the woman and her daughters clearly distraught after the flight (see Timeline 2). Gremminger wrote, “I want to help this woman and her daughter. They lost their dog because of an @untied flight attendant. My heart is broken” (Gremminger, 2018). The tweet has since received 5,541 retweets and 17,678 likes (See Figure 1). Another passenger, June Lara, posted on his Facebook page about the incident saying he held the woman’s baby as she cried over the animal. He wrote that the family paid $125 for their pet to be murdered in front of them. His post has since received 371,000 reactions, 119,000 comments, and 275,000 shares (Josephs, 2018).

**Response:** The day after the event, United issued a statement taking full responsibility for the event and promising to investigate further:

This is a tragic accident that should have never occurred, as pets should never be placed in the overhead bin. We assume full responsibility for this tragedy and express our deepest condolences to the family and are committed to supporting them. We are thoroughly investigating what occurred to prevent this from ever happening again. (Sun-Times Staff, 2018, para. 5)

Two days after the event, a United spokesperson updated the public on the initial findings of the investigation. The spokesperson, Charles Hobart, said:

We have learned that the customer did tell the flight attendant that there was a dog in the carrier. However, our flight attendant did not hear or understand her, and did not willingly place the dog in the overhead bin. As we stated, we take full responsibility and
are deeply sorry for this tragic accident. We remain in contact with the family to express
our condolences and offer support. (Price, 2018, para. 3)

Hobart also reported that the airline would begin tagging animal containers with bright tags to
prevent similar tragedies from happening in the future. The airline also told CNBC it would
refund the cost of the family’s tickets, the fee paid to transport the dog, and fund the necropsy of
the animal. In response to United Airline’s existing issue with in-flight animal deaths Hobart
said, “The overwhelming majority (of deaths), according to medical experts, were due to existing
medical conditions or the animal wasn’t properly acclimated to its crate” (Josephs, 2018, para.
15).

This story was picked up by travel website The Points Guy. CEO Brian Kelley expressed
his concerns about United’s PetSafe practices for the transportation of animals: “I think United
tries to make a business out of pet transport with this program, but (airline) ramp workers are not
veterinarians” (Genter, 2018, para. 8). The blog post generated over 900 comments and
discussion posts.

Five days after the incident, United Airlines announced its plan to issue special pet carrier
tags to minimize risk of future harm to traveling animals (The Associated Press, 2018). The
bright colored bag tags were to be issued to customers traveling with in-cabin pets. On the same
day, a Harris Country, Texas, district attorney announced an investigation of the situation as a
possible criminal offense (The Associated Press, 2018).

The final news article directly about the incident from my selected news source, Chicago
Sun-Times, was published March 21, 2018. This article’s focus was on the CEO’s response to the
incident and his plans to rebuild trust. United Airlines CEO, Oscar Munoz, spoke at a luncheon
with the Executives’ Club of Chicago. He said the recent incidents within the company have
allowed him and other leaders to, “Learn where there are holes in the company, where there’s a lack of clarity or where we’re being too strict” (Chorney, 2018, para. 7). He also reminded his audience that United Airlines was not looking to cover up mishaps or make them go away. He said, “We want to constantly be reminded of how things can go wrong so quickly and it importantly tells us to make sure through training, developing, guiding our efforts to have a semblance of thought and personal involvement in these situations” (Chorney, 2018, para. 4). Munoz referred to the incident as an “event that won’t be forgotten” (Chorney, 2018, para. 5).

United Airlines implemented its reformed PetSafe travel policy in May 2018 (Bazerghi, 2018, para. 3). The policy puts a restriction on snub-nosed dogs and cats (like the French bulldog) flying in-cargo due to their greater health risks. No other animals besides dogs and cats are allowed. Also, the policy puts a restriction on in-cargo pet transportation between May 1 and September 30 through desert areas due to high temperatures. On March 15, Harris Country, Texas, announced its launch of a criminal investigation. On May 25, the case between United and the family settled for an undisclosed amount. The company implemented new pet carrier identification strategies as well as a new in-cargo policy as a result of the incident.

**Analysis.** The news coverage on this issue from the *Chicago Sun-Times* lasted nine days and consisted of six stories published specifically about the incident. The first story emerged March 12 and the final story was published March 21. The company issued all of its official statements via spokespeople (such as Charles Hobart) directly to news outlets. United Airlines did not release any official communications through its social media platforms about the incident. In fact, its normally active Twitter page halted all activity from March 12-20.

United Airlines used several of Benoit’s (2015) image repair strategies to communicate with the public about this incident. The strategic communication implemented after the event
included corrective action, mortification, elements of evasion of responsibility (in its justification), and reducing offensiveness (through the CEO’s message).

The first piece of communication given to news sources provides an example of mortification. This statement was released the day after the incident occurred:

This is a tragic accident that should have never occurred, as pets should never be placed in the overhead bin. We assume full responsibility for this tragedy and express our deepest condolences to the family and are committed to supporting them. We are thoroughly investigating what occurred to prevent this from ever happening again. (Sun Times Staff, 2018, para. 5)

Here we see United Airlines accepting full responsibility for a preventable crisis. According to Coombs’ (2015) definition, this statement qualifies as a full apology. United Airlines acknowledges the crisis, accepts responsibility, includes a promise to not repeat the mistake, and expresses concerns and regret. As shown by Coombs’ (2015) definition of an apology, United Airlines identifies itself as being liable for the event in a court of law.

The next statement comes from spokesperson Charles Hobart and includes an interesting mix of corrective action and a slight evasion of responsibility (or, perhaps, shifting) as well as explicit mortification. Hobart’s communication included this statement:

We have learned that the customer did tell the flight attendant that there was a dog in the carrier. However, our flight attendant did not hear or understand her, and did not willingly place the dog in the overhead bin. As we stated, we take full responsibility and are deeply sorry for this tragic accident. We remain in contact with the family to express our condolences and offer support. (Price, 2018, para. 3).
United claims the incident was an accident by explaining that the flight attendant did not realize there was a dog in the bin before insisting it be placed in the overhead bin. This statement pushes blame onto the flight attendant herself for the misunderstanding. United attempts to protect the flight attendant by claiming her actions were unintentional. Clearly, the company understands its fault in the situation by the acceptance of “full responsibility for the incident” and by expressing that it is “deeply sorry for this tragic accident.” While offering that the incident happened as an unintentional misunderstanding between a flight attendant and a customer might make the situation more understandable in the public eye, the clear apology and acceptance of blame show responsibility and anticipation of further action.

The second part of Hobart’s communication is our first example of United Airline’s steps toward corrective action. Hobart announced United’s plans to implement a policy to mark pet carriers with brightly colored tags to avoid future confusion. He also expressed that the airline would refund the cost of the family’s tickets, the fee paid to transport the dog, and fund the necropsy of the animal.

The final piece of communication worth analyzing for the scope of this project came from Oscar Munoz, CEO, at the Executives’ Club of Chicago luncheon. Munoz’s statement included promises to focus on rebuilding trust and acknowledgement of “holes in the company” that need to be fixed (Chorney, 2018). He gave an overview of the corrective action processes in place to prevent future tragedies (such as the brightly colored dog tags and the company’s multi-year strategy). He also stated that he doesn’t want these PR blunders to just “go away” and that he wants to be constantly reminded how things can go wrong. He makes note of the importance of training and guiding employees to have some “semblance of thought and personal involvement in issues” (Chorney, 2018) I argue that this message by the CEO employs the
reducing offensiveness strategy by boosting the company image to improve reputation through
genuineness and honestly. The CEO’s message related positive attributes of the company
(willingness to learn from mistakes, dedication to improvement) while maintaining the expected
amount of guilt attributed to the company.

**Dallas Mavericks Case Study**

**Facts.** On February 20, 2018, *Sports Illustrated* broke an investigative news story
reporting more than a dozen current and ex-employees of the Dallas Mavericks speaking out
about the team’s hostile work environment over the past two decades (see Timeline 3).
Allegations ranging from sexual harassment to domestic violence came out in the *Sports
Illustrated* special investigation by Jon Wertheim and Jessica Luther. The story painted the
team’s corporate culture as a “real life Animal House” with testimonies from numerous women
about unacceptable workplace behavior (Wertheim & Luther, 2018, para. 7). The article
identified three main perpetrators: President and CEO, Terdema Ussery, director of HR, Buddy
Pittman, and a high-level web content writer named Earl Sneed.

Giving a brief overview of the history of this situation, *SI* reported that allegations against
Ussery dated all the way back to 1998 when he was investigated following complaints of sexual
misconduct. The Mavericks brought in Buddy Pittman to manage HR as a result. The
investigation hardly affected Ussery’s career, and he remained president when Mark Cuban
purchased the team in 2000. *SI* reported that Pittman frequently took strong public stances on
political issues and would vocalize his overt social and religious beliefs. He was known to
ignore, deflect, and minimize complaints from female employees about Ussery—sometimes
outright physically intimidating them into recoil. Ussery’s misconduct and Pittman’s apathy were
well known among women in the organization (Wertheim & Luther, 2018).
Pittman’s inaction did not stop with allegations against Ussery. In 2011, Mavs.com writer Earl Sneed was involved in a domestic violence dispute with his girlfriend and was arrested on Mavericks’ company property (Wertheim & Luther, 2018). The event did not end his employment with the team. Sneed went on to date a female Mavericks colleague and multiple sources reported to SI that in 2014 the couple had a dispute and, again, Sneed turned violent. The woman reported the incident to her supervisor and to Pittman. Sneed remained an employee of the team. When asked about why Sneed was retained, Pittman declined comment. Ussery left the Mavericks to work for Under Armor in 2015 for reasons seemingly unrelated to his repeated predatory behavior. A week before the SI story was published, when asked about the situation, owner Mark Cuban said that he had just fired Pittman and suspended (later to be fired) Sneed. Cuban reported, “feeling sick to his stomach”( Wertheim & Luther, 2018, para. 36).

The article made it clear that the allegations were not directed towards the Dallas Mavericks athletes or coaching staff; the issue was entirely corporate. Sports Illustrated stated that more than six women contacted for the story reported leaving the sports sector as a result of the traumatizing work environment. A male department head at American Airlines said, “There was built-in protection for a lot of men. The lack of oversight and compassion within all levels of the business was alarming” (Wertheim & Luther, 2018, para. 11).

Response. The following statements were given before the story was published on February 20, 2018, and are in response to the findings of the investigation conducted by SI.

On February 12, Cuban’s told SI the following:

This is all new to me. The only awareness I have is because I heard you guys were looking into some things….. Based off of what I’ve read here, we just fired our HR person. I don’t have any tolerance for what I’ve read.
It’s wrong. It’s abhorrent. It’s not a situation we condone. I can’t tell you how many times, particularly since all this [#MeToo] stuff has been coming out recently I asked our HR director, ‘Do we have a problem? Do we have any issues I have to be aware of?’ And the answer was no.

I deferred to the CEO, who at the time was Terdema, and to HR.... I was involved in basketball operations, but other than getting the financials and reports, I was not involved in the day to day [of the business side] at all. That’s why I just deferred. I let people do their jobs. And if there were anything like this at all I was supposed to be made aware, obviously I was not.

I want to deal with this issue,” Cuban told SI. “I mean, this is, obviously there’s a problem in the Mavericks organization and we’ve got to fix it. That’s it. And we’re going to take every step. It’s not something we tolerate. I don’t want it. It’s not something that’s acceptable. I’m embarrassed, to be honest with you, that it happened under my ownership, and it needs to be fixed. Period. End of story.

(Wertheim & Luther, 2018)

On February 13, Ussery also made a statement to SI:

I am deeply disappointed that anonymous sources have made such outright false and inflammatory accusations against me. During my career with the Mavericks, I have strived to conduct myself with character, integrity and empathy for others. During my nearly 20 year tenure with the Mavericks, I am not aware of any sexual harassment complaints about me or any findings by the organization that I engaged in inappropriate conduct. In fact, on multiple occasions I and other senior executives at the organization raised concerns—both in person and in emails—
about other Mavericks employees who had engaged in highly inappropriate—and in some cases, threatening—sexual conduct. The organization refused to address these concerns, and I believe these misleading claims about me are part of an attempt to shift blame for the failure to remove employees who created an uncomfortable and hostile work environment within the Mavericks organization (Wertheim & Luther, 2018).

The Dallas Mavericks make its first official statement on Feb 20, 2018, one hour before publication of SI story:

The Dallas Mavericks have received information about behavior in our workplace that appears to have violated the organization's standards of conduct. It has been alleged that a former officer of the organization engaged in various acts of inappropriate conduct toward women over a period of years. This individual left the employment of the Mavericks nearly three years ago and the Mavericks have only learned of the scope of these complaints in the past days.

The Mavericks organization takes these allegations extremely seriously.

Yesterday we notified the league office and immediately hired outside counsel to conduct a thorough and independent investigation. The investigation will focus on the specific allegations related to this former employee, and will look more broadly at our company’s workplace practices and policies. In addition, an employee whose job was to receive and investigate such complaints and report them accurately and fully, has been suspended pending the conclusion of our investigation.
In a separate matter, we have also learned that an employee misled the organization about a prior domestic violence incident. This employee was not candid about the situation and has been terminated.

There is no room for such conduct in the Mavericks’ workplace — or any workplace.

The Mavericks will provide all necessary resources to ensure that every current and former employee receives appropriate support. We will also conduct comprehensive training through experts and take the necessary steps to ensure that our workplace is a safe, respectful and productive one for all Dallas Mavericks employees.

We are committed — to our employees, our team and our fans — to meet the goals of dignity, security and fairness that define the Dallas Mavericks.

We will not make any further comments until after the completion of the investigation” (Dallas Mavericks, 2018).

On the day the story was published, the NBA made this statement:

The Dallas Mavericks have informed us of the allegations involving former team president Terdema Ussery and Mavs.com writer Earl Sneed. This alleged conduct runs counter to the steadfast commitment of the NBA and its teams to foster safe, respectful and welcoming workplaces for all employees. Such behavior is completely unacceptable and we will closely monitor the independent investigation into this matter (NBA, 2018).

The remainder of this case study outlines the communication and actions by the team following the publication of SI’s special investigation. The news source I selected to collect content about this case was the Dallas Morning News: Sports Day.
The day following the SI story’s release was a busy day for Mavericks communication. On February 21, 2018, Sports Day reported that the Mavericks hired Evan Krutoy and Anne Milgram to lead an independent investigation into the situation. Also on February 21, 2018, Mark Cuban revealed in an interview how the allegations against Sneed were handled within the company and how he (Cuban) was ultimately responsible for the decision to keep Sneed on staff:

I want to be clear: I’m not putting the blame on anybody else. It came down to the final decision that I made. In hindsight, I would have fired him and still made him go to counseling.

It was bad, but we made a mistake about the whole thing and didn’t pursue what happened with the police after the fact. So we got it mostly from Earl’s perspective, and because we didn’t dig in with the details— and obviously it was a horrible mistake in hindsight—we kind of, I don’t want to say took his word for it, but we didn’t see all the gruesome details until just recently. I didn’t read the police report on that until just Tuesday, and that was a huge mistake obviously.

So when the second time came around ... the way I looked at it was -- and, again, in hindsight it was a mistake -- but I didn't want to just fire him, because then he would go out there and get hired again and do it somewhere else," Cuban told ESPN. "That's what I was truly afraid of and that was the discussion we had internally. It was a choice between just firing him and making sure that we had control of him.

So I made the decision, it was my decision and again, in hindsight, I would probably do it differently. I made the decision that we would make him go to domestic abuse counseling as a requirement to continued employment, that he was not allowed to
be alone without a chaperone in the presence of any other women in the organization or any other women in a business setting at all, and he was not allowed to date anybody [who works for the Mavericks]. From that point on -- and the investigators are going to see if we missed anything else -- he appeared to abide by all those rules, as far as I knew.

So that was my decision. What I missed -- and it was truly a f---up on my part because I was not there [at the Mavericks' office] -- I looked at everything anecdotally. My real f---up was I didn't recognize the impact it would have on all the other employees. I looked at this as a one-off situation where, OK, if I don't do anything, this person could go out there and do damage on another women another time. Or do I say, can we get him counseling to try to prevent that from happening again? I thought I was doing the right thing at the time.

What I missed, again, is I didn't realize the impact that it would have on the workplace and on the women that worked here and how it sent a message to them that, if it was OK for Earl to do that, who knows what else is OK in the workplace? I missed that completely. I missed it completely. (MacMahon, 2018)

Following Cuban’s interview came statements from Maverick’s Coach Rick Carlisle and star player Dirk Nowitzki. When asked to comment about the situation, Carlisle said:

I'm going to make a brief statement, a little bit about what I know. First of all, I'm grateful we live in a place and time where people have the courage to speak up about things like this. I also have a 13-year-old daughter, and I want her to know that it's both brave and safe to speak out, and that's very important to me and it should be important to everybody.
What I can tell you is there's going to be a thorough investigation into this from an outside group led by two people at the top of their profession. Anne Milgram is a former attorney general in the state of New Jersey. She will lead it, and she will be assisted by Evan Krutoy who is a 20-year veteran of the New York City DA's office. They are going to do a very in-depth investigation. They're going to talk to everybody in the organization, and they're going to find out the how, the why, and the best way to resolve this. An outside party was brought in so that there will be no local influence or anything like that, and these people are the best of the best.

Their findings are going to go directly to Mark Cuban and Adam Silver, and the Mavericks will abide by whatever recommendations are made. I can tell you that when it comes to anything involving the Mavericks, Mark Cuban is a strong believer in extreme ownership, extreme accountability and he is highly motivated to get this resolved in an expeditious and thorough fashion, and no steps will be skipped in this. (Sefko, 2018)

Nowitzki said:

It’s tough. It’s very disappointing. It’s heartbreaking. I’m glad it’s all coming out. I was disgusted when I read the article, obviously, as everybody was. I was shocked by some of the stuff. Just really disappointed in our franchise—my franchise—that stuff like that was going on. It’s just very sad.

But I think Mark is trying to step up and lead this franchise in the right direction. Hiring investigators, finding out all the little details that we have to know as a franchise of what really is going on. I think Mark is going to step up and find answers.
And we as a franchise, we feel bad for the victims and for what happened to some of these ladies—like I said, truly disgusting. Our thoughts and prayers are definitely with these victims. (Sefko, 2018)

On February 23, 2018, the *Sports Day* published an interview with columnist and talk show host, Kevin Sherrington, who compared the Mavericks’ crisis to that of other sports teams. Sherrington referred to the situation as a “lose-lose for Mark Cuban” and said that his best course of action would be to come clean about what he knew and when he knew it (Sherrington, 2018, headline).

On February 26, 2018, at a press conference, Cuban announced the appointment of interim CEO Cynthia Marshall, a former AT&T chief of HR. Marshall asserted, “I will fail if we’re in a headline a year from now” (Sherrington, 2018, para. 9). She also said, “it’s a workplace with zero tolerance. Let me repeat that. I just covered this with the team this afternoon. A place where there is a zero tolerance for sexual harassment, domestic violence or any type of inappropriate behavior” (para. 14). Sherrington referred to Marshall as an, “eloquent, candid, wildly engaging former human resources chief” (para. 7).

On February 27, 2018, Mark Cuban announced he had cancelled his scheduled appearance at SXSW, a music and arts festival in Texas (Repko, 2018). On February 28, 2018, *Sports Day* published highlights from an interview between Dallas reporter, Eddie Sefko, and talk show hosts Kevin Sherrington and Barry Horn. The three spoke highly of interim CEO Cynthia Marshall and discussed the possibility of suspension for Cuban as punishment for complacency in the events (Sefko, Sherrington, 2018).
On March 2, 2018, Sherrington spoke again on the state of Cuban’s public image and made the prediction that the team would not lose its first round draft pick as punishment for the events (Sherrington, 2018). He noted that Ussery came to the team highly recommended and revocation of first round draft privileges is not standard.

On March 3, 2018, Sports Day reported that this situation with the Mavericks had caused Jerry Jones, owner of the Dallas Cowboys, to take a closer look into the Cowboys’ company culture (Hairopoulos, 2018). Jones insisted he was not commenting on the Mavericks but was speaking in generalities about how sensitivity is important in company protocol and should have been just as prevalent 20 years ago when allegations first emerged.

On March 6, 2018, the team announced a sponsorship agreement that included the addition of a jersey logo patch with Dallas-based company, 5miles (Townsend, 2018). Cuban denied that any partnerships were terminated as a result of the SI report. The 5miles CEO commented on his experience working with the Mavericks, calling the team a, “world-class organization,” and saying his company was, “completely supportive of them,” as Cuban and the organization do, “everything they can do to investigate exactly what happened and also put in place the best practices” (Townsend, 2018, para. 6).

On March 7, 2018, details about an allegation against Cuban surfaced. The Willamette Week published a story outlining graphic details of inappropriate touching involving Cuban in a Portland bar seven years ago (Cowlishaw, 2018). Cuban denied the incident saying, “It didn’t happen” (Cowlishaw, 2018, para. 4).

Over the course of the team’s investigation, the Mavericks hired a new HR director, an ethics and compliance officer, and a new head of diversity and inclusion
(Evans, 2018). The team also established mandatory “Respect in the Workplace” training for all employees and a hotline for any employee to express concerns. The NBA also began requiring the team to present quarterly reports on the progress of its new policies (Respect in the Workplace training and Sexual Misconduct Education training) and to report to the league any future instances of misconduct by employees. So far the team has been compliant with the new requirements (Evans, 2018).

On September 18, 2018, results of the seven-month investigation were released (Evans, 2018). Information from 215 interviews, 1.6 million documents, and 20 years of other content were compiled into a 40-page report. The investigated confirmed inappropriate conduct (including touching and forced kissing) between the former president, Ussery, and 15 female employees. The investigation also found ticket sales employee Chris Hyde responsible for inappropriate sexual advances, comments, and threats towards female employees as well as the viewing and sharing of pornography during company time. The report confirmed the two domestic violence allegations against Sneed. One victim was a Mavericks employee.

On September 19, 2019, Cuban appeared visibly distraught in a video interview with ESPN following the release of the investigation report. He apologized to victims and their families by saying, “This is not something that just is an incident and then it's over. It stays with people. It stays with families. I'm just sorry I didn't see it. I'm sorry I didn't recognize it" (Cuban 2018). In this interview he also gave a promise to, “be better” in the future about recognizing and addressing issues of sexual harassment (Cuban, 2018).

The team’s new CEO, Cynthia Marshall, also participated in this interview. She gave the final statement thus far about the incident:
It is regrettable that this problematic workplace culture was not addressed sooner. I do believe we have now addressed it and created an environment that is respectful of women and men. We will continue to take steps to support and restore employees as best we can. (Marshall, 2018)

On this same day, it was reported that Mark Cuban would donate $10M to organizations that promote women in corporate leadership positions and fight domestic violence. The team was also fined $2.5M by the NBA (the max fine according to bylaws) (Townsend, 2018).

**Analysis.** The news coverage on this case from the *Dallas Morning News* was extensive and wide reaching. I have collected dozens of stories related to and directly about the incident and the team. My analysis of the situation focuses on the stories that report specifically about the sexual assault allegations and the ongoing investigation. News stories related to games and players are not included in the following analysis. The *Dallas Morning News*’ coverage on this incident lasted for one year and consisted of 21 stories published specifically about the repercussions of the *SI* report.

**Comparing Responses of Key Actors**

This next part of this case study will include individual analyses of each piece of communication from the relevant parties in this event. The analysis will stem from a combination of identifying the strategies outlined by Benoit (2015) and cross analyzing the prescribed course of action by Coombs (2015) for the given situation. Some conclusions are relatively straightforward while some will be more complex and open to debate. This case is extremely multi-faceted and, therefore, may be subject to multiple interpretations. Each situation will be analyzed by outlining the party’s identification, interests, attributed responsibility, image repair strategies used, theoretical match to SCCT, and effects or results.
**Mark Cuban.** The analysis of Mark Cuban will be a dissection of his three main statements over the course of this event. The first is his original response to the SI investigation on February 20, 2018; the second is his interview response addressing the Sneed situation on February 21, 2018; and the third is his interview with ESPN following the results of the private investigation on September 19, 2018.

**Actor.** Mark Cuban is the celebrity owner of the Mavericks with an estimated net worth of over $4.1 billion (Abadi & Akhter, 2018). He is an outspoken public figure well known for his reoccurring appearance on NBC’s reality television show, Shark Tank.

**Interests.** Cuban’s personal interests (separate from maintaining a positive image of the team) are important to address in this situation. Cuban has his own personal brand that is strongly tied to the Dallas Mavericks. It can be assumed that it is among his top priorities to maintain a strong image in the public eye for the benefit of his other ventures and investments. Cuban would have been interested in making the story come to an end as well as keeping his position with the team. Throughout his communication, he seemed to be trying to take enough blame for the situation to maintain a positive public image for the team without sacrificing too much of his own reputation and ego.

**Attributed Responsibility.** Cuban’s level of attributed responsibility was high. Cuban is the top executive of this organization, and he had the ability to take preventative action in previous years to avoid this type of crisis. He faced blame in this situation because he is the head of the organization as well as the face of the brand. Throughout his communication, he took responsibility for not knowing about the misconduct but he did not take responsibility for condoning the behavior. He claimed his reason for not taking action was not due to indifference but due to lack of information from those who should have been informing him.
**Image Repair Strategies.** Cuban’s responses are an interesting representation of a progression through Benoit’s list of strategies as time goes on.

**Denial.** His initial, arguably “knee-jerk,” statement was denial. He expressed simple denial that he knew of any wrongdoing. He said the news of the investigation was, “all new to him.” He repeated throughout his statements that he had no idea what was going on within the organization, and if he had, he would have taken action. At this point, he made statements using scapegoating. While it is subtle, I argue that by saying, “I let people do their jobs,” and by saying, “And if there were anything like this at all, I was supposed to be made aware, obviously I was not” (Wertheim & Luther, 2018, para. 31), he was attempting to shift blame to those who were supposed to inform him. Presumably, his hope was that he could not be held responsible for wrongdoing because the people who were required to alert him of misconduct failed to do so.

**Defeasibility.** One could also argue that this type of excuse is an example of defeasibility, part of the evading responsibility strategy. By pleading a lack of information or control over the important factors in the situation, Cuban was arguing that he should not be held fully liable. This specific type of defeasibility goes hand in hand with the use of simple denial outlined above. Cuban said:

I was involved in basketball operations, but other than getting the financials and reports, I was not involved in the day to day [of the business side] at all. That’s why I just deferred. I let people do their jobs. And if there were anything like this at all I was supposed to be made aware, obviously I was not. (Wertheim & Luther, 2018, para. 31)

**Transcendence.** Cuban’s second major statement to the press moves further down Benoit’s list of strategies by using a variation of transcendence to explain his decision to keep Sneed on staff after his arrest. He justified his actions by saying, “…I didn’t want to just fire him, because
then he would go out there and get hired again and do it somewhere else” (February 21, 2018). Cuban went on to explain the policies that were put in place to ensure Sneed was properly reprimanded for his actions but continued to insist that it was his own decision to keep Sneed on staff to ensure he “had control of him” (February 21, 2018). He explained his rationale by saying, “I looked at this as a one-off situation where, OK, if I don't do anything, this person could go out there and do damage on another women another time. Or do I say, can we get him counseling to try to prevent that from happening again? I thought I was doing the right thing at the time” (MacMahon, 2018). By directing attention to a place of well meaning he seems to have been trying to get the public to look at the “big picture.” Cuban probably did this in an attempt to reduce some of the offensiveness of his actions. While the audience can choose to believe him or not, he offered his explanation for why he did what he did.

**Bolstering/Compensation.** Cuban donated $10 million to women’s charities in the aftermath of this scandal. This strategy involves compensation and, arguably, bolstering. This is because the donation did not actually fix the team’s problem (i.e., corrective action), but it did make a social impact. Cuban attempted to associate new beliefs of positive values to his personal brand so his audience will view him favorably.

**Corrective Action.** While Cuban could not fix the emotional damage that was done to the victims, he could take steps to ensure that it did not happen again. In his first statement, a prime example of corrective action was the immediately firing Pittman, the HR director. Cuban said, “I want to deal with this issue…There’s a problem in the Mavericks organization and we’ve got to fix it. That’s it. And we’re going to take every step” (February 12). As mentioned earlier, the new policies put in place for the team also fit in this category in addition to hiring Cynthia Marshall to lead the team as president and CEO.
This tactic is not used directly in the three statements I chose to analyze but is present in actions such as his $10M donation to women’s organizations and immediate firing of the perpetrators after the SI report came out. The new policies put in place for the organization during the span of the private investigation also fall under this category.

### SCCT Recommendations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relevant Recommendation</th>
<th>Recommendation Followed?</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Use rebuilding strategies for any preventable crisis</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Apology and compensation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use denial strategies in rumor crises</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Not a rumor crisis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use denial strategies in challenges where the challenge is unwarranted</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Challenge was warranted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use corrective action in challenges when other stakeholders are likely to support the challenge</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Firing Pittman, Sneed; internal company changes, donation, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use reinforcing strategies as supplements to other response strategies</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Bolstering/compensation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be consistent, do not mix denial strategies with either diminishment or rebuilding strategies</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Mixed several strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diminishment and rebuilding strategies can be used in combination with one another</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Transcendence, Bolstering/Compensation, Corrective Action, Mortification</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Mortification.** Arguably, most of Cuban’s strategic communication falls under this category. From the beginning of his contact with the press, he apologized and acknowledged the hurt his organization had caused. “It’s wrong. It’s abhorrent. It’s not a situation we condone. It’s not something we tolerate. I don’t want it. It’s not something that’s acceptable. I’m embarrassed, to be honest with you, that it happened under my ownership, and it needs to be fixed” (Wertheim & Luther, 2018, para. 36). He continued this language in his final interview with ESPN about the
situation, saying, “This is not something that just is an incident and then it's over. It stays with people. It stays with families. I'm just sorry I didn't see it. I'm sorry I didn't recognize it” (George, 2018, para. 6). In this interview, he continuously promised to “be better” (George, para. 6).

**Effects/Results.** Assuming that one of Cuban’s main interests in his communication was making the story disappear from the media as quickly as possible, it is difficult to say if his strategy was effective. Coverage of the story lasted in the *Dallas Morning News* for about a year. However, the final story published February 16, 2019 was overwhelmingly positive and outlined the success of Cuban’s leadership post-crisis and the effectiveness of the new policies put in place.

Cuban used four out of the seven recommended strategies provided by SCCT. The largest discrepancy in Cuban’s communication and the SCCT recommendations comes from his use of the denial strategies. The audience clearly cannot know if Cuban is being truthful in his assertion that he was unaware of the behavior going on within his company. Both Benoit (2015) and Coombs (2015) argue that denial is dangerous because if the actor is found to be dishonest about his knowledge or involvement, the repercussions will be much worse than avoiding the denial strategy all together. For Cuban, no evidence came to light about the truthfulness of his statements. Due to his apparent honesty, I would argue that the denial strategy was well used regardless of the SCCT recommendations.

Arguably, Cuban’s use of the corrective action strategy is the most notable to analyze for this project. As a spectator, I argue that Cuban did an exceptional job putting policies in place and taking action towards righting the wrongs committed under his leadership. The immediate firing of the alleged perpetrators was both timely and effective in sending a message to victims
and stakeholders that he took the allegations seriously. The media reports show Cuban’s cooperation with the investigators, his generous donation, and his personal hand in the new policies put in place to prevent a similar situation from happening in the future. Perhaps his greatest act of correction was hiring Cynthia Marshall, the first black and female CEO in the history of the NBA. Marshall’s background in diversity and inclusion sends an important message to the company.

**Terdema Ussery.** This analysis is based on Ussery’s statement to *Sports Illustrated* prior to the release of the special investigation report.

**Actor.** Ussery is the former CEO of the Dallas Mavericks, employed by the organization for 18 years. He resigned from his position with the team in 2015 for a similar job with Under Armor, which he left after less than two months. *(Wertheim & Luther, 2018)*

**Interests.** Ussery’s interests in this situation include his professional standing as well as his personal reputation and relations with family and friends. Through my research, I have been unable to identify Ussery’s current place of employment or really much information about him at all following the *SI* report. However, I assume his interests in communicating on this topic include preserving his public image for current and future employment. Information on his personal life is also scarce, yet it can be assumed that his statements aim to preserve some of his private relationships as well. However, it should be noted that both his personal and professional interests are separate from the Mavericks organization as a whole, and he was not speaking on behalf of the team in 2018, just representing himself and his own interests.

**Attributed Responsibility.** Ussery’s level of attributed responsibility was high. He was one of the main actors in the situation, and he was clearly identified by multiple women as being a perpetrator of sexual harassment. He was a high level executive within the company with the
ability to abuse power to his benefit. His reputational threat was extremely high in this situation as well.

**Image Repair Strategies.** Ussery, who was no longer with the Mavericks when the crisis broke, used a number of defensive strategies.

*Denial.* Ussery maintained innocence throughout the course of this entire event. In his statement he called the accusations “outright false and inflammatory”. *(Wertheim & Luther, 2018, para. 25)*. He then went on to claim that he was not aware of any sexual harassment complains about him during his time with the team. He also denied that the organization refused to address his own concerns about other employees behaving inappropriately (see below).

*Bolstering.* His strategy then shifted to an interesting attempt to bolster his reputation by saying that throughout his career he, “strived to conduct myself with character, integrity and empathy for others” *(Wertheim & Luther, 2018, para. 25)*. Then he claimed he and other senior executives actually raised concerns about other employees in the company behaving inappropriately and nothing was done about it.

*Shift blame.* Ussery’s use of the shift blame tactic is interesting because he actually claimed that the company was shifting its own blame onto him to save face. He claimed the allegations against him were an attempt to remedy the organization’s failure to remove those employees who he insisted were actually guilty of what he was accused of doing. This could also be seen as an example of victimage according to Coombs’ strategy compilation.

*Effects/Results.* Like Cuban, Ussery’s deviance from following the recommendations of SCCT comes from his use of denial strategies. Unlike Cuban, Ussery’s use of denial strategies was not effective in repairing his image in the same way. His statement did two things—first, he claimed he was, “not aware of any sexual harassment complaints about him” *(Wertheim &
Luther, 2018, para. 25) despite the allegations against him outlined by the *Dallas Morning News* in 1998. Second, he said not only that he was not a sexual harasser, but that he actually was trying to prevent sexual harassment from happening under his leadership.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relevant Recommendation</th>
<th>Recommendation Followed?</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Use denial strategies in rumor crises</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Not a rumor crisis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use denial strategies in challenges where the challenge is unwarranted</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Challenge was not unwarranted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use corrective action in challenges when other stakeholders are likely to support the challenge</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No corrective action strategies used</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The victimage strategy should only be used with the victim cluster</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Attempts to make the audience view him as a victim of rumors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be consistent, do not mix denial strategies with either diminishment or rebuilding strategies</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Used denial exclusively</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ussery is the only actor in this crisis who used the victimage strategy. This type of image repair often comes across as disingenuous and immature. Stakeholders following the story closely would most likely not be convinced by Ussery’s statement of innocence.

However, I do find it important to note that his use of the denial strategy might have been the only option from his perspective. It was proven in the investigation that the allegations against him were true. Throughout my research I found no evidence of the media referring to him as a “liar” or claiming that his reputation was hurt due to this statement. Was he in better shape to lie than to confess to horrendous wrongdoing? His interests remain personal and therefore he needed to maintain a consistent image of innocence in order to save face personally. It is hard to say what would have come to light if Ussery had confessed to the acts alleged
against him, but it is clear that his statement of innocence did little to repair his damaged public image.

**Dallas Mavericks.** This analysis focuses on the statement the Dallas Mavericks posted on Mavs.com just before the *SI* story was published.

*Actor:* The Dallas Mavericks are an American professional basketball team based in Dallas, Texas. The Mavericks compete in the National Basketball Association as a member of the league's Western Conference Southwest Division.

*Interests:* The interests of the Dallas Mavericks were not the same as the individuals within the organization (Cuban, Ussery, Carlisle, etc.). The organization as a whole is interested in maintaining its positive standing with the NBA for factors such as first round draft picks, fines, and structural consequences within the association. The team also wants to maintain a good public image with fans so people will continue to buy tickets and merchandise.

*Attributed Responsibility:* The Dallas Mavericks’ level of attributed responsibility was **high.** This crisis was a part of the preventable cluster including human-error and organizational misdeeds. The stakeholders affected by this incident would place a high level of responsibility on the team for allowing such events to occur.

*Image Repair Strategies:* The Maverick’s response was a blend of defensive and accommodative strategies.

*Denial.* The Mavericks—like Cuban—denied any knowledge of wrongdoing within the company. The organization claimed to have only learned of the complaints three days prior to its response.

*Corrective Action.* The team explained that the behavior exhibited “violates the organization’s standards of conduct” and that the organization “takes these allegations very
seriously” (Dallas Mavericks, 2015, para. 2). Corrective action can be seen when the Mavericks explained that the NBA had been notified of the allegations and outside counsel had been hired to conduct an investigation into the incident. The team also announced the suspension of “the employee whose job was to receive and investigate such complaints and report them accurately and fully” (Dallas Mavericks, 2018, para. 3). The statement then referenced Sneed (not by name) and confirmed his termination as well. Then the team vowed to “provide all necessary resources to ensure that every current and former employee receives appropriate support” and promises to “conduct comprehensive training through experts and take the necessary steps to ensure that our workplace is a safe one for all employees”. (Dallas Mavericks, 2018, para. 3).

*Mortification.* While the Mavericks did seem to be careful not to apologize outright pending the completion of the investigation, the team still made several qualifying statements of mortification. It said, “There is no room for such conduct in the Mavericks’ workplace—or any workplace” (Dallas Mavericks, 2018, para. 3). While this statement is not an explicit admission of wrongdoing, it does acknowledge the severity of the allegations and serves as a declaration of zero tolerance. The second example of mortification is, “We are committed—to our employees, our team and our fans—to meet the goals of dignity, security and fairness that define the Dallas Mavericks” (Dallas Mavericks, 2018, para. 3). This statement shows an acknowledgement of wrongdoing and movement in the direction of repair.

*Effects/Results:* Only one of the Dallas Mavericks’ image repair strategies lined up with recommendations from SCCT. The team’s use of corrective action aligned with the SCCT recommendation, and I argue that it was effective and appropriate for the situation.
Again, the use of the denial strategy comes into question here. The team denied any knowledge of wrongdoing. We have seen that when there is no proof of dishonesty, the use of the denial strategy can be effective and even necessary in repairing a damaged image.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relative Recommendation</th>
<th>Recommendation Followed?</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Use denial strategies in rumor crises</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Not a rumor crisis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use denial strategies in challenges where the challenge is unwarranted</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Challenge is not unwarranted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use corrective action in challenges when other stakeholders are likely to support the challenge</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>See Cuban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be consistent, do not mix denial strategies with either diminishment or rebuilding strategies</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Mixes several strategies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In following the SCCT recommendation for corrective action, the team put in place mandatory employee policies and procedures to prevent this type of offensive act from occurring in the future. This strategy served the team’s interest in maintaining trust and respect with the public and continuing to foster the image of the organization as a safe and desirable place to work.

**NBA.** The NBA made one statement the day after the *SI* article was published.

**Actor:** The professional basketball league in which the Dallas Mavericks compete.

**Interests:** The NBA has interests in maintaining the image of the league, overall. The NBA would, of course, prefer if the Mavericks maintained a positive public image, but presumably, its first concern is that the overall league has a strong image.

**Attributed Responsibility:** The NBA’s level of attribution in this situation was **low.** There was no communication suggesting that the NBA condones sexual harassment or assault, nor was
there any indication that the league knew what was going on. Regardless of how the affected parties images were affected, the NBA’s overall image was only in danger if it did not take the crisis seriously. The image repair strategies used here are an attempt to protect the league from a negative public response as a result of inaction.

**Image Repair Strategies:** Because the NBA was not under as much pressure as the other actors in this case, its response looked somewhat different.

**Defeasibility.** Since the league has such a limited role in the crisis, its main strategy in communicating with media outlets was maintaining disappointment in the situation and expressing how the league does not condone this behavior.

**Corrective Action.** The league enforced several consequences and restrictions on the team over the course of this situation. While this was not an attempt to repair its own image, it was important to maintain a sense of responsibility in the image repair of the team. Inaction would have sent a message to the public that the NBA was indifferent to the acts and misdeeds identified in the SI article.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relevant Recommendation</th>
<th>Recommendation Followed?</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Use rebuilding strategies for any preventable crisis</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Corrective action, Mortification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use corrective action in challenges where other stakeholders are likely to support the challenge</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Consequences and restrictions for Mavericks</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Effects/Results.** The NBA holds minimal responsibility in this situation. Its interest in preserving the image and prestige of the league as a business and as a brand are important in choosing how to communicate with the public about the incident. The NBA has a responsibility to express to stakeholders that it does not condone sexual misconduct and that it takes such allegations very seriously.
The statement from the NBA was direct and serious, and it sent the message that all necessary steps would be taken to punish those involved and prevent this situation from happening again in the future. I argue that it was necessary for the league to make a statement communicating with the public about the plan in place to take care of the crisis to the best of it’s ability.

**Head Coach.** Like the NBA, Maverick’s coach Rick Carlisle was not blamed for any wrongdoing. Thus, his response was different from the responses of Cuban, Ussery, and the team.

**Actor.** Rick Carlisle has been the head coach of the Mavericks since 2008.

**Interests.** Carlisle was not accused of any wrongdoing over the course of this crisis. In fact, it was made clear on multiple occasions that the issue was not related to the players or coaches and all accusations were against the business operations. However, Carlisle is still a representative of the brand and these accusations could have affected his reputation as a coach and a member of the organization. His interests in making a statement likely included a desire to express his personal stance against sexual harassment or violence, as well as his desire to distance himself from the accused. He made it clear that he did not condone the behaviors outlined in the SI article and stood behind the team as all proper measures were taken to remedy the situation.

**Attributed Responsibility.** Carlisle’s level of attributed responsibility was low. He was not personally linked to the allegations in any way and was not accused of any wrongdoing. He also had limited ability to prevent the crisis in the first place and was therefore not held accountable by stakeholders.
**Image Repair Strategies.** For the reasons above, Carlisle did not need to use image repair strategies.

**Effects/Results.** I argue that because Carlisle had such a low level of attributed responsibility and was facing no personal allegations in the situation, his statement served as a formality to express his disapproval and communicate the plans for change within the organization. This statement does not consist of any image repair strategies because his personal image needed no repairing. I would argue that this is an image maintenance strategy to communicate to the public that he disapproves of the offensive acts and does not condone the behavior alleged in the SI article.

**Discussion**

Researching how companies repair a damaged image in the hyper-connected world of social media and easily accessible print media led me to interesting insights about human complexity when looking at individual interests. My research had led me to the conclusion that while the literature on this subject can be helpful to use as a guide for image repair, some situations involving individual interests are more complicated and do not fit perfectly into a theory or model. That being said, as a result of looking deeply into these cases and following the trajectory of their various image repair campaigns, I have identified four main takeaways.

The first lesson from analyzing these case studies comes from the challenging nature of the denial strategy when it comes to personal interests. Denial works best when it is used truthfully. However, in both cases of Cuban and Ussery with the Dallas Mavericks, the denial strategy was used to pursue personal interests. Denial can help uphold the truth when used appropriately. However, when used incorrectly (i.e., when one is lying or altering the truth) this strategy can do more harm than good. From my research, it became apparent to me that the truth
often does come out and it is better to steer on the side of caution when using denial. This is clear in Cuban’s situation where he has to rescind his initial response of not knowing anything about the situation to come clean about his involvement with Sneed. Similarly, those who were following the story closely would pick up on the fact that Ussery’s denial was mostly false and his statement to the public proved him to be dishonest.

Second, I learned the value of avoiding PR “spin.” Mark Cuban’s statement to the press about why he did not initially fire Sneed following his arrest was a carefully crafted piece of PR designed to diffuse a situation involving denial gone wrong. To the average person viewing the statement, it might come across as a pretty good response. However, to someone following along more carefully, or someone who just senses something fishy, the response seems “spun.” Having to backtrack and justify a bad decision that he previously insisted he did not know about was not an ideal position to be in. Contrasting this point, the H&M communication and the United Airlines communication did a good job of avoiding the “spin”. Both cases dealt with the situation directly and with genuine intentions that in-turn kept the story out of the news in the long run.

Third, I learned the value in aligning the accused’s beliefs with that of the audience. In all three cases I analyzed, the accused made a great effort to acknowledge the severity of the issue and reassure the public that its values and beliefs aligned with that of the audience. This can help the public heal and move forward from the crisis. Rebuilding trust and faith in a company’s core values can be a long process, but in the cases I analyzed, the public (or at least the media) generally reacted positively to the organization showing remorse and shame for the hurt caused in the crisis.

The final lesson worth noting as a part of my research is that the corrective action strategies and tactics are what people remember the most. In all three cases, it was the corrective
action that rebuilt the damaged reputations and maintained trust within the public sphere. For the Dallas Mavericks, this meant hiring a new CEO with extensive background in diversity and inclusion. For United Airlines, this meant new policies and procedures in place immediately to prevent any further tragedies. For H&M this meant hiring new team members with the sole purpose of checking and double-checking all materials for sensitivity issues before releasing to the public. For all of these organizations, corrective action was costly and burdensome. But as the damage control came to an end, all three organizations are still in business today and remain household names for reasons other than their individual crises.

The limitations of my research include the small number of cases I was able to analyze due to the depth of study I engaged with on each one. My research could go on indefinitely with every new crisis that comes about but I only had the timeframe to analyze three cases occurring in the year 2018. My research also was limited by the inability to monitor every single news story published on each individual case. My method of data collection was to monitor the news source closest to the organizations headquarters, although a broader range of data collection could have been beneficial to my research as well. My project was also unable to measure the publics opinions and reactions beyond what was covered in the news stories I analyzed due to the sheer volume of responses on a multitude of platforms. I would hope that in the future, researchers continue to conduct case studies similar to mine to monitor the trends in image repair and how the field evolves with time. Studies such as mine could be built upon by adding in social media analyses and surveys of the public as the crises unfold in real time.

My research of the best practices of modern-day image repair in the year 2018 has shown the importance of using the denial strategy correctly, the dangers of PR “spin”, and the impact that positive beliefs and actions can have on an organization’s reputation.
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release-statement-si-story-regarding-dallas-mavericks-official-release


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General Strategy</th>
<th>Tactic</th>
<th>Applied Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denial</td>
<td>Simple denial</td>
<td>I did not embezzle money.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shift blame</td>
<td>Steve took your wallet, not me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evade Responsibility</td>
<td>Provocation</td>
<td>I insulted you but only after you criticized me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Defeasibility</td>
<td>I was late because traffic delayed me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Accident</td>
<td>Our collision was an accident.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Good Intentions</td>
<td>I didn’t tell you because I hoped to fix the problem first.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce offensiveness</td>
<td>Bolstering</td>
<td>Think of all the times I helped you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Minimization</td>
<td>I broke your vase, but it was not an expensive one.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Differentiation</td>
<td>I borrowed your laptop without asking; I didn’t steal it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Transcendence</td>
<td>Searching travelers at the airport is an inconvenience, but it protects against terrorism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Attack accuser</td>
<td>Joe says I embezzled money, but he is a chronic liar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Compensation</td>
<td>Because the waiter spilled a drink on your clothes, we’ll have it dry cleaned.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corrective action</td>
<td></td>
<td>Because the waiter spilled a drink on your suit, we’ll have it dry cleaned.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mortification</td>
<td></td>
<td>I’m so sorry I offended you. I regret hurting your feelings and I apologize.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. SCCT Crisis Response Strategies by Posture

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Posture</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Denial Posture</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attacking the accuser</td>
<td>The crisis manager confronts the person or group that claims that a crisis exists. The response may include a threat to use force (lawsuit) against the accuser.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denial</td>
<td>The crisis manager states that no crisis exists. The response may include explaining why there is no crisis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scapegoating</td>
<td>Some other person or group outside the organization is blamed for the crisis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Diminishment Posture</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excusing</td>
<td>The crisis manager tries to minimize the organization’s responsibility for the crisis. The response can include denying any intention to do harm or claiming that the organization had no control of the events that led to the crisis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justification</td>
<td>The crisis manager tries to minimize the perceived damage associated with the crisis. The response can include stating that there were no serious damages or injuries or claiming that the victims got what they deserved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rebuilding Posture</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compensation</td>
<td>The organization provides money or other gifts to the victims.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apology</td>
<td>The crisis manager publicly states that the organization takes full responsibility for the crisis and asks forgiveness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bolstering Posture</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reminding</td>
<td>The organization tells stakeholders about its past good works</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ingratiation</td>
<td>The organization praises stakeholders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victimage</td>
<td>The organization explains how it too is a victim of the crisis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crisis Response Strategy</td>
<td>Asset for Crisis Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denial Posture</td>
<td>Attacking the accuser</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scapegoating</td>
<td>Eliminates responsibility for a crisis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diminishment Posture</td>
<td>Excusing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebuilding Posture</td>
<td>Compensation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apology</td>
<td>Organization accepts responsibility for the crisis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bolstering Posture</td>
<td>Reminding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ingratiation</td>
<td>Adds positive information about the organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victimage</td>
<td>Builds sympathy for the organization</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figures 1. United Airlines Tweet

MaggieGremminger
@MaggieGrem

I want to help this woman and her daughter. They lost their dog because of an @united flight attendant. My heart is broken.

❤️ 17.6K  10:15 PM - Mar 12, 2018
Timeline 1. H&M

- January 7
  - Tweet from Stephanie Yaboah goes viral
- January 8
  - Musician The Weeknd canceled collaboration with H&M
- January 9
  - H&M releases official statement on Twitter and website
  - LeBron James and Diddy criticize the brand
- January 10
  - Rapper G-Eazy cuts ties with brand
- January 11
  - Reports surface about the social media statement from model’s mother
- January 13
  - Reports of store storming in South Africa
  - H&M releases official statement on Twitter and website
- January 14
  - Reporting on store storming continues
- January 16
  - Reports that family of the child model has moved from the country as a result of the issue
  - H&M issues “We Are Listening” Tweet
  - H&M announces the hiring of a diversity leader on Facebook
- January 17
  - Reports continue about diversity leader
Timeline 2. United Airlines

- March 12
  - Dog incident occurs
  - Tweet from Maggie Gremminger goes viral
  - Facebook post from June Lara goes viral
- March 13
  - United releases “tragic accident” official statement to news sources
  - The Points Guy blog post
- March 14
  - Charles Hobart (spokesperson) statement to news sources
  - Chicago Sun Times publishes story about United’s track record
- March 15
  - United announces plan to implement special tags for pet carriers
  - Criminal investigation announced
- March 20
  - United announces suspension of in-cargo pet transportation
- March 21
  - CEO Oscar Munoz statement to Executives’ Club of Chicago
- April 1
  - New pet carrier tag policy starts
- May 1
  - United announces new pet travel restrictions
- May 25
  - USA Today reports settlement
Timeline 3. Dallas Mavericks

- Extended background
  - 1998
    - Ussery’s initial allegations/investigation
    - Pittman hired as head of HR
  - 2000
    - Mark Cuban purchases team
  - 2011
    - Sneed arrested for DV dispute
  - 2014
    - Sneed reported to HR for another DV dispute by female colleague
  - 2015
    - Ussery leaves team to work for Under Armor for reasons unrelated to allegations

- 2018 timeline
  - February 12, 2018
    - Cuban makes statement prior to publication of SI report
  - February 13, 2018
    - Ussery makes statement prior to publication of SI report
  - February 20, 2018
    - Dallas Mavericks makes statement (one hour) prior to publication of SI report
  - February 20, 2018
    - Sports Illustrated special investigation report published
  - February 20, 2018
    - NBA makes statement following publication of SI report
  - February 21, 2018
    - Mavericks announce hire of Evan Krutoy and Anne Milgram to lead independent investigation
    - Cuban makes statement about Sneed
    - Coaches (Carlisle and Nowitzki) make statements
  - February 23, 2018
    - Sherrington article published
  - February 26, 2018
    - Cuban announces appointment of interim CEO, Cynthia Marshall
  - February 27, 2018
    - Cuban announces cancellation of SXSW appearance
  - March 2, 2018
    - Sherrington team outcome predictions published
  - March 3, 2018
    - Jerry Jones makes statement about Cowboys
  - March 6, 2018
    - Mavericks announce sponsorship agreement with 5miles
  - March 7, 2018
- Cuban’s allegation details emerge
  - September 18, 2018
    - Results of investigation released
  - September 19, 2018
    - Cuban and Marshall interview with ESPN
- Undisclosed dates
  - Over the course of the investigation
    - Appointment of new HR director, ethics and compliance officer, head of diversity and inclusion
    - Mandatory Respect in the Workplace training for all employees
    - Hotline established for all employees to report anonymously
    - NBA requires quarterly reports about progress of new policies
Abstract

I analyzed and researched three high profile corporate crises that occurred during the timeframe of my project (Spring 2018-Spring 2019). This study looked at William L. Benoit’s traditional image repair strategies and Tim Coombs’ Situational Crisis Communication Theory to see how they function in crises faced by American corporations today. I researched each of these cases systematically to uncover the image repair strategies used in each case and determined whether the strategy was effective based on responses from the news outlet closest to the source. I used this information to develop original insight on the effectiveness of the use of traditional image repair strategies for crises in 2018 and beyond.

The scope of this project focused exclusively on unintentional nonviolent crises. This particular focus interests me because of the highly connected, fast-paced, informational time we are in. A company or organization’s reputation (built over years or decades) can be tarnished by a single Tweet or online news article. I am interested in exploring how communication professionals respond for the inevitable. Are they ever truly prepared? How bad is too bad? In a highly connected world where there are essentially no secrets and very rarely does anyone get away with anything, how do companies manage to save face in light of human error?

My systematic analysis includes a coding process guided by the image repair strategy chart outlined below. I looked at the statements released by corporations as soon as the crisis went public and determined the image repair strategies used throughout the course of the event. My systematic analysis continued with the study of news articles released by the source closest to the crisis (Dallas Morning News, Fort Worth Star Telegram, etc.) and measuring the amount of time the story was reported in the news.
I uncovered multiple trends and patterns among modern day image repair campaigns and corporate apologies. I found information on what constitutes a positive image repair campaign and what American corporations are doing right (and wrong). Many of these findings are linked to the literature on the topic and some of them actually stood on their own as the result of human complexity that is not covered in existing image repair research.